

## Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

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TAGS:

SUBJECT: SEPT. 17 TIME MAGAZINE KOMPONG CHAM STORY

REF: PHNOM PENH 9904

1. VERBATIM TEXT SUBJECT STORY AS FOLLOWS:

2. CAMBODIA. THE REBELS MOVE. EVER SINCE THE US BOMBING HALT WENT INTO EFFECT ON AUG. 15, THE MOST OMINOUS QUESTION ABOUT CAMBODIA'S FUTURE HAS BEEN: WHEN WOULD THE HANOI-BACKED KHMER INSURGENTS MAKE THEIR BIG MOVE? DESPITE SEVERAL WEEKS OF CONCENTRATED ASSAULTS BY AMERICAN B-52S, THE REBEL FORCES HAD BEEN ABLE TO MOVE TO WITHIN TEN MILES OF THE CAPITAL OF PHNOM-PENH PRIOR TO THE DEADLINE. THOSE SWEEPING ADVANCES SUGGESTED THAT THE TROOPS OF CAMBODIAN PRESIDENT LON NOL, ONCE THEY WERE DENIED THE SUPPORT OF U.S. WARPLANES, WOULD BE HARD-PRESSED TO STAVE OFF A MAJOR ENEMY ATTACK.

3. LAST WEEK MORE THAN 5,000 INSURGENTS LAID SIEGE TO A COMPARABLE FORCE OF GOVERNMENT SOLDIERS DEFENDING KOMPONG CHAM, CAMBODIA'S THIRD LARGEST CITY (PEACETIME POP. 125,000, NOW ABOUT 65,000), APPROXIMATELY 50 MILES NORTHEAST OF PHNOM-PENH. LON NOL VOWED THAT HE WOULD NOT LET KOMPONG CHAM FALL AND DISPATCHED MAJOR

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GENERAL SAR HOR, THE HIGHLY REGARDED MINISTER OF VETERAN AFFAIRS, TO TAKE CHARGE OF ITS DEFENSES. NONETHELESS, THE INSURGENTS STEADILY ADVANCED. USING AMERICAN 105-MM. HOWITZERS CAPTURED LAST MONTH FROM FLEEING GOVERNMENT TROOPS, THEY MASSIVELY SHELLED THE CITY, RENDERING KOMPONG CHAM'S AIRPORT USELESS. GOVERNMENT SUPPLIES AND REINFORCEMENTS HAD TO BE BROUGHT IN BY BOAT CONVOY, HELICOPTER OR AIR DROP. BY MIDWEEK, ANTIGOVERNMENT GUNNERS HAD ZEROED IN SO CLOSELY ON HELICOPTER LANDING PADS THAT MANY PILOTS COULD NOT LAND. THE ADVANCE WAS SO RAPID THAT TWO C-130S ERONEOUSLY DROPPED 28 TONS OF GOVERNMENT SUPPLIES BEHIND THE INSURGENTS' LINES, THUS GIVING THEM PLENTY OF NEW AMMUNITION FOR THEIR CAPTURED ARTILLERY.

4. THOUGH LON NOL THREW SEVERALTHOUSAND FRESH RESERVES INTO THE BATTLE, THE REBELS CONTINUED TO MOVE TOWARD THE CITY'S LIMITS. ONE GOVERNMENT SOLDIER, EVACUATED TO A HOSPITAL IN PHNOM-PENH, MOANED: "THEY KEEP COMING AND COMING." AT A LARGE TEXTILE FACTORY JUST OUTSIDE THE TOWN--WHICH HAD BEEN BUILT FOR CAMBODIA BY CHINA--LON NOL'S TROOPS FLED UNDER FIRE WHILE THE WORKERS AND MANANGERS REMAINED BEHIND, TRYING UNSUCCESSFULLY TO HOLD BACK THE INSURGENT ATTACKS. INSIDE THE CITY ITSELF, HOUSE-TO-HOUSE FIGHTING ERUPTED AROUND THE CENTRAL MARKETPLACE WHEN REBEL INFILTRATORS SUDDENLY SURFACED. USING ARMORED SCOUT CARS THAT THEY HAD CAPTURED FROM THE GOVERNMENT, THE REBELS MOVED AGAINST THE GOVERNOR'S MANSION AND ITS IMPORTANT HELICOPTER PAD. DESPITE INSURGENT GAINS, THE GOVERNMENT SAID AT WEEK'S END THAT IT COULD HOLD THE TOWN, HOWEVER, AND THE OUTCOME OF THE BATTLE WAS STILL IN DOUBT.

5. REAL TEST. THE BATTLE FOR KOMPONG CHAM THUS BECAME THE FIRST REAL TEST OF LON NOL'S ARMY SINCE THE END OF U.S. BOMBING SUPPORT. THE COMMUNIST-BACKED FORCES WOULD LIKE TO MAKE THAT CITY THEIR PROVISIONAL UNCLASSIFIED

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CAPITAL AFTER IT IS CAPTURED. ONCE KOMPONG CHAM FALLS, LITTLE WILL PREVENT THE INSURGENTS FROM MOVING SOUTH FOR AN ONSLAUGHT AGAINST PHNOM-PENH. IN TERMS OF TIMING, THE INSURGENTS HAVE THE INITIATIVE. THE CAPITAL'S DEFENSES REMAIN RELATIVELY WEAK, DESPITE THE OCCASIONALLY STRONG SHOWING OF SOME GOVERNMENT ARMY UNITS IN CLEARING THE HIGHWAYS THAT RADIATE FROM PHNOM-PENH. SOME MILITARY OBSERVERS BELIEVE

THAT THE REBELS MAY DECIDE TO HOLD OFF THEIR ATTACK

UNTIL THE END OF THE YEAR, WHEN THE WATERS WILL HAVE RECEDED FROM THE MONSOON-SWOLLEN COUNTRYSIDE, THUS MAKING MOVEMENT OF TROOPS EASIER. A DELAY WOULD ALSO GIVE THEM TIME TO PREPARE AN ADMINISTRATIVE CADRE TO TAKE OVER THE CAPITAL.

6. THERE ARE NO PRESENT SIGNS THAT DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS CAN AVERT WHAT THREATENS TO BECOME A BLOODY BATTLE FOR THE CAPITAL. TALKS INVOLVING THE U.S. AND NORTH VIET NAM ARE GETTING NOWHERE. THE CAMBODIANS THEMSELVES ARE DOING LITTLE TO SPEED A NEGOTIATED PEACE. LON NOL AND HIS COLLEAGUES CONTINUE TO HURL BARBS AND INSULTS AT FORMER CAMBODIAN LEADER PRINCE NORODOM SIHANOUK, THE INSURGENTS' PRINCIPAL SPOKESMAN; SIHANOUK RETURNS THE INSULTS. THE MOOD OF PHNOM-PENH ITSELF DOES LITTLE TO CONVEY A FEELING OF URGENCY. IT REMAINS A LEAFY, DREAMY CITY IN WHICH THE STATE ORCHESTRA COULD ENTHUSIASTICALLY PERFORM A PUBLIC CONCERT OF WALTZ MUSIC WHILE KOMPONG CHAM WAS UNDER SEIGE. THIS LOSS OF TOUCH WITH REALITY WAS ALLUDED TO LAST WEEK BY RETIRING U.S. AMBASSADOR EMORY SWANK AT HIS FAREWELL PRESS CONFERENCE IN PHNOM-PENH. LOOKING PALE AND TIRED AFTER THREE YEARS IN CAMBODIA, SWANK TOLD REPORTERS: "THE WAR IS LOSING ITS PURPOSE AND HAS LESS AND LESS MEANING." RUSH

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